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AUTHOR Henney, Maribeth
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ABSTRACT

With the current emphasis on whole language, the use of children's literature as the basis for reading instruction is widespread. Theme units have been suggested as one way to provide stimulating opportunities for children to explore and learn. Whole language based literature theme units emphasize process more than product. Units are designed to encourage students to use information from literary, scientific, and historical bodies of knowledge of the past and present, and to speculate about the "what-ifs" of the future. Units may be organized in various ways, for example, by topic, genre, author, literary devices, vocabulary and language; and by having students read a whole text and then discuss it. A variety of resources and materials can be incorporated into unit study. Teachers first need to consider the content they wish to convey and the type of unit to be taught, and then plan appropriate activities to achieve their goals. Literature-based theme units are a way to immerse children in reading and enable them to use this reading in interesting, meaningful, relevant activities. (Thirty-seven references are attached.) (RS)

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LITERATURE-BASED THEME UNITS

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Introduction

With the current emphasis on whole language, the use of children's literature as the basis for reading instruction is widespread. Goodman (1986) recommends that teachers develop theme units to provide stimulating opportunities for children to explore and learn. But how does a teacher use literature other than simply turning the children loose to read whatever they choose? And is this really instruction or simply recreational reading?

What is a literature-based theme unit?

A unit is not a peripheral of the curriculum but rather can be the core of what children do in school. It is an indepth study, incorporating many subject areas, and developing over a long period of time. Time must be allowed for the unit to unfold and develop. Children become frustrated if they just get involved in a topic and then have to quit. It is impossible to predict exactly how long a unit will run, but it usually requires at least six to eight weeks depending upon the unit focus. Children become immersed in the theme, explore its many facets, experience a wide variety of literature, and become experts in some aspect of the unit in which they are personally interested.

Units are designed to encourage students to use information from literary, scientific, and historical bodies of knowledge of the past and present, and to speculate about the "what-ifs" of the future. A theme deserving of study must be of interest to the children, and be broad enough that it can be divided into many smaller subtopics. The relationship of the

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subtopics to the overall topic should remain clear, however. There should be flexibility in dealing with the topic--lots of directions that different children can go to study some aspect about the topic in which each is interested. Developing a literature web will enable the teacher to see the potential possibilities for a particular theme. The unit focus should be placed at the center, with spokes out from the center, labeled with possible categories of subtopics for study, activities, related books, and other resources.

The topic should lend itself to comparing and contrasting ideas. Extensive investigation of concrete situations, materials, and resources should be possible. This includes use of the community as well as resources normally found inside the school. Parental involvement is welcomed.

Unit study will break down barriers between subjects, a false separation which occurs in many classrooms. It is truly a cross-disciplinary program. It allows for problem solving and discovery as children pursue answers to their own questions about a topic. It gives them a choice of authentic, relevant activities. Skills are taught as needed by children during the unit. Whatever fits naturally is incorporated into what the children are working on. If there are skills and knowledge which the teacher feels the children should have which do not fit into the unit, they are taught separately at another time.

The whole language approach emphasizes process more than product. In other words, the most valuable time for a teacher to help a child is while he/she is working at something, not after it is completed. Then instruction can be pertinent to the skills children need to do what they want to do and help with problems can be given immediately so that they can get on with the

task of learning. Evaluating a final product may show what the children did not know, but does nothing to help them learn and develop.

Theme units facilitate process learning, but in order for process to occur there must also be content. We study about something; we don't just study. In theme units, neither content nor process is ignored. Meaning is central. All learning is undertaken for purposes related to the content. Children decide to study the content because it is important to them. The study is not just a coverup for teaching word recognition, punctuation, spelling, etc. Skills are learned but not through isolated drill. They are learned because they are necessary tools for achieving one's own purposes. A caution, however! We should be careful not to reach too far to use literature for teaching skills or involving children in certain activities. If we do, they may think that books are only for the teacher's purposes instead of providing entertaining and positive experiences.

Learning can be a social activity. People work together to achieve goals. This is in contrast to the isolated and competitive learning found in many classrooms. Children are encouraged to talk about what they are doing, to bounce ideas off of others, to get feedback on their efforts, or to share their completed projects. The learning environment is an accepting one, supporting children's attempts, allowing them to take risks and enter into areas of learning where they have not traveled before, recognizing that making errors is a normal part of development and may be used by the teacher as signals for what the child is ready to learn next and what he/she may need help with.

Types of Units

Units may be organized in various ways. Here are some possibilities.

It is recommended that a teacher keep a balance of types of units used throughout the year.

Topic. A specific topic of interest to the class may be chosen, based upon a previous survey of the children's interests. For instance, the circus, flight, health, music, pets, the family, weather, sports, holidays, or so many other topics may be the focus of study. This type of unit could also be used to study a certain country or a different period in history. Topic units work well for whole class study, but also for interest grouping where children sign up for a topic they wish to work on. Several such units might be running concurrently. Children of all reading abilities would be in each group. The focus is on the topic, not ability. There will be ways in which each child can contribute to the unit study, regardless of ability.

Genre. A unit may center on a specific genre of literature (form of writing), such as tall tales, Greek myths, folktales, legends, fables, biography, mysteries, poetry, plays, or more loosely defined, could include newspapers (editorials, news stories, classified ads, feature stories, etc.). Distinguishing between narrative and expository writing would also be appropriate. Comparing different versions of the same story is an enjoyable activity for this type of unit.

Authors. Favorite authors of children's literature may be studied. Good readers select books by authors. Children often enjoy learning about authors, where they come from, how they began writing, on what they base their writing, etc. They want to read all of an author's books. They are then much more aware of the authors of books they select to read, rather than choosing a book only by its topic. This is one step in helping children develop a concept of "author." By studying other authors and then sharing

their own writing and telling why they chose certain topics, how the content or storyline was developed, etc., they realize they are authors also.

Illustrators can also be studied in a like manner, for many books have such lovely illustrations. Children should recognize the importance of the illustrations to the book and begin to select books on this basis as well.

Literary devices. Units in which literary devices are studied would be most appropriate for intermediate grade students or older. After reading and discussing many books which employ a certain device such as foreshadowing, flashback, irony, parody, character trait development, point of view, development of themes, common motif patterns, or other characteristics of writing, they will understand the use of these devices and be able to employ them in their own writing. The elements of story grammar or structure could also be studied, to determine how narrative writing follows a pattern of development (introduction, setting, characters, conflict or problem, developmental events, roadblocks, attempts to overcome the problem and reach a goal, climax, resolution, conclusion). Developing language awareness is another possibility for a unit. How do authors use language for description, intrigue, dialogue, explanation, etc.?

Vocabulary and language study. Units which enable children to explore language, play with words, and learn about a variety of types of words will interest children at any grade level. Where did our alphabet come from? How was writing begun? Where did paper come from? How and why was printing done? How are books published? Where do our words come from? Why is spelling so inconsistent in phoneme-grapheme relationships? What are eponyms, spoonerisms, malopropisms, homographs, homophones, coined words, and so many other types of words? How do such words make writing interesting? What are

alliteration, connotation, and figurative language? How can we communicate without using words? What are some activities to do to learn about words and language, such as hink pinks, word mazes, crossword puzzles, tongue twisters, riddles, pattern puzzles, etc.? What children's books are available to learn more about language? There are many possibilities for language study units.

One book. Children, as a whole class or as a smaller literature group, can read a whole text and then discuss it and do related activities. All of the above aspects, such as expanding on the basic topic of the book, reading related sources, studying the author and illustrator, discussing the genre characteristics, and looking at literary devices and vocabulary used, can be incorporated. The theme that the author intended to communicate can be discussed. How do we know that the author is telling us this? Then other books exemplifying that theme could be found by children and read. Also other books on a related topic could be used for extension of this basic source.

If basals are used in a classroom, literature study can be integrated in other ways. Most basals present their content organized by "units." Following one section of a basal, take a few weeks to explore real literature, extending what was in the basal. Perhaps explore real books related to the same topic. Read books by an author whose selection was in the basal. Compare a selection from the basal to the original book, noting differences in style of writing, vocabulary used, parts omitted, illustrations, and even story line. Some basals give a part of a book for the purpose of making children interested enough in the book that they will read all of it. This could be done as follow-up for the whole group. Time should be provided daily for some personal recreational reading, such as USSR, DEAR, or SQUIRT. The importance of children having an opportunity to lose themselves in reading real literature can not be overemphasized. In this way we are helping them to

discover the joy of reading and to develop habits of independent reading which will remain with them all during their lives.

Components of a Unit

Each of the types of units described above will have certain activities which are most appropriate, but all units have some commonalities.

A variety of resources and materials can be incorporated into unit study. The teacher first needs to consider the content he/she wishes to convey and the type of unit to be taught, and then plan appropriate activities to achieve his/her goals.

First of all, books form the basis for study in a literature unit, so the teacher should gather as many examples of books focusing on what is being taught as is possible. A minimum of at least two books per child is recommended. Include not only books, but also magazines, brochures, catalogs, reference sets, posters, hands-on materials, films and filmstrips, slides, pictures, community resources, people, etc. Poetry, audiovisual materials, drama scripts, and vocabulary study activities are all appropriate and add variation to reading books. Everything is a possible source of learning. Include both narrative and expository literature, and things written for adults as well as children. Students can often glean some bits of information from a source even if they can not read it thoroughly. Plan an attractive, easily accessed way to display all of these materials, in order to motivate children to want to become involved in the unit.

For a topic unit, find books about that topic. In teaching about a genre, many books demonstrating the use of that genre are required. Author or illustrator units should provide all the books produced by that person, as well as autobiographical and biographical sources about the person. For the

study of literary devices, it is essential that books be carefully selected to insure that they clearly and explicitly exemplify that which is to be taught. If students cannot easily see that device being demonstrated, then the book will be more confusing than helpful and should not be included. For studying about language and words, there are many interesting books written at a child's level of understanding.

Secondly, after many resources have been collected and an inviting display designed, a motivating introduction to the unit should be given. The teacher many discuss with the children what they already know about the theme of the unit, whatever it may be. They may express some questions that they have about the area of study, and suggest some activities they would like to do to learn more about it. The teacher should explain that there are many possibilities for learning about this area, and perhaps build a web with the children to graphically show what they might want to study.

Next, the children must be given time to explore and read and think over a period of many days. The teacher can acquaint children with some of the available sources by reading to the whole class or a small group, while others may be read independently. Therefore time must be allowed daily for this purpose. At this point in the study no independent activities need to be done, only concentrated reading and getting acquainted with the sources available.

Discussion is an important part of this step, as well as recording in various forms what is learned. Children must be guided to glean from their reading the important aspects on which the unit is focused. For instance, in studying a genre, it is essential that children understand the characteristics

of that genre. What is it that characterizes a folktale or a myth? How would one recognize this genre? How does this type of writing differ from some other genre? Or if the children are studying an author, discuss books written by that author. What can they identify about that author's writing? What are some recognizable patterns or devices used by this author which distinguishes him/her from other authors? How does this relate to what was learned about the author's background? Why do they like to read books written by this author? For a unit about literary devices, discussion will enable the students to verbalize their understanding of the devices being used, read aloud examples of their use in the books studied, tell how the author develops them within the context of the whole selection, note what significance they play to the overall understanding of the piece, and discover how the same literary device may be used somewhat differently by different authors.

Whatever the focus of the unit, children must usually be guided to study writing in these ways, since they have been more accustomed to simply comprehending books for the content itself. This type of study requires that they go beyond basic comprehension and look at sources from a writer's perspective. It may be difficult for some children to step outside of the story itself and look at it from the author's viewpoint--why were certain writing techniques used, how did the author build characterizations, what genre characteristics does this piece of writing have, what is the effect of using description instead of dialogue here to convey these ideas, etc. The teacher will need to model for students the thinking required for this type of literature study. Then careful use of questioning can eventually lead students to analyze literature not only for basic comprehension but from the author's standpoint as well.

Following the reading and directed study and discussion, the children are ready to do some related activities. Some whole class activities could be done, as well as others by small groups and individuals. There should be many possibilities available, as well as allowing children to come up with their own. Let children follow their own interests, branching off from something read. Language arts activities may be incorporated, including such things as sharing a book or one's own writing through puppetry, readers' theater, scripting a play, debates, expressing ideas through music or dance, giving speeches, reading aloud, etc. A learning center is helpful for presenting potential activities, materials to be used, additional resources to read, computers for recording ideas, tapes and tape recorders, writing materials, book binding materials, games, art and craft ideas, etc. These activities may be either independently done or through self-selected peer groupings. The teacher must be available for assistance as needed but should not be leading the children at this time.

All children should be encouraged to include writing activities among their independent work. Depending on the focus of the unit, children should be expected to apply what they have learned to write their own examples of literature. For instance, for a topic unit, children would write about that topic, sharing what they had learned through the unit study or perhaps writing a poem or story related to that topic. For a genre unit, children should attempt to write a selection of that genre, using the characteristics identified earlier through reading and discussion. In an author unit, children would attempt to write as that author does, incorporating the characteristics of that person's writing. After studying various literary devices, students should attempt to write selections using such devices. For

vocabulary study, children can write stories or poems using some of the new types of words they learned about. As this writing is done, further discussion with each child is necessary to be sure he/she is conscious of the process he/she is using. Peer response groups may be used to let children share what they have written and get feedback from others. The goal here is not to produce a perfect piece of writing, but to experience what writers think, feel, and do as they write for a particular purpose.

If students wish to polish their writing to share it with the whole class or some other audience, they should be encouraged to do this. They may decide to do this through a variety of ways, such as making a personal book, contributing to a bulletin board, taping an oral reading of their writing, making postures or charts, reading to another class, or sending their writing to a children's magazine which publishes children's work.

As a final step to the unit, a culminating activity of some sort should be planned cooperatively between the teacher and the children. This might be rather short such as a discussion of the major things that were learned and accomplished through the unit, or something more extensive such as a program for parents. There are many possibilities for concluding a unit.

Benefits of theme unit study

What are children learning from participating in units besides the content focused upon? Of course reading and writing are primary activities and are therefore strengthened through meaningful application. Because all content areas are integrated, children see a purpose for their use and enjoy studying such information much more than when it is fragmented into separate subjects. The involvement of art, music, movement, talk, and drama make learning more interesting.

Since units are a form of guided research, children learn how to plan and organize their study, to recognize possible problems to study, to form questions and/or hypotheses, to observe, predict, and interpret, to find needed resources, to compare information from various sources, to analyze and question, to think critically, and to synthesize and present new learnings. They consider alternatives and make their own decisions based on reasons they can explain and justify.

Children experience independence in learning. They become responsible for their own learning and are active participants in the learning process, making decisions about what to read, what to write, what activities can best help them learn, and how to schedule their time to accomplish what they want to do. They learn to cooperate with peers and be supportive of each other. They find they can be useful contributors to a group. Self-confidence increases due to frequently experienced successes.

Concluding Remarks

Literature-based theme units are a way to immerse children in reading and enable them to use this reading in interesting, meaningful, relevant activities. Planning such units takes time, but once implemented, the benefits to children can be quickly seen. They are a natural way to bring children and literature together--a basic goal of whole language.

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